

Exploring Dimensions of Responsibility in Tourism

EQUATIONS

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In India, like in many other parts of the developing world, tourism is viewed and promoted as a development paradigm and a sustainable growth option. However, along with the growth in tourism, concerns about the adverse impacts of tourism are also growing. In this context, there is the need to increase responsibility in tourism.

Parameters of responsibility in tourism should address tourism holistically, keeping in mind its economic, environmental, social and cultural aspects and the strengthening of institutions, processes and policies. This paper puts down a broad framework of themes that could constitute a possible definition of responsible tourism. It draws from an understanding of the impacts of tourism (positive and negative) and efforts from around the world towards responsible tourism.

In India, like in many other parts of the developing world, tourism is viewed and promoted as a 'development paradigm' and a sustainable growth option. Tourism has the potential to provide employment, cultivate tolerance and encourage knowledge of different cultures, while aiding in the preservation of heritage and the environment. However, along with the growth in tourism, concerns about the adverse impacts of tourism are also growing. Current models and forms of tourism also leave serious questions about the extent to which local communities¹ actually benefit from this growth.

Although tourism statistics show that a large amount of revenue is brought into the region, factors like the rate of leakage of tourism receipts and to what extent the local economy is able to retain revenues generated by tourism is still not clear. Analyzing these would help establish baseline data on the local linkages, and set a measurable road map to increase local benefits. Tourism destinations are facing increasing pressures on their natural, cultural and socio-economic environments. Uncontrolled and unregulated tourism growth, often based on short-term priorities, invariably results in adverse impacts that negate the positive potential of tourism. There is also being felt the need to provide communities with the space and platform to voice opinions on their positive and negative experiences in tourism.

In this context, there is the need and the potential of increasing responsibility in tourism. Parameters of responsibility in tourism need to address tourism holistically keeping in mind its economic, environmental, social and cultural aspects and strengthening institutions, processes and policy to maximize benefit and minimize adverse impacts.

There is no standard pre-determined definition of responsible tourism except guidelines, practices and cases that reflect how tourism can be developed in a more democratic, wholesome and non-exploitative manner that is meaningful both for local communities and tourists. While talking about the framework for responsibility in tourism, there is a need to closely assess the impacts of tourism. This would contextualise tourism to ground realities thereby helping understand how responsible practices will strengthen the positive, mitigate the negative and establish institutions and policies that work towards this. Alongside impacts, it is equally important to acknowledge initiatives taken by different players to work towards responsibility even within their roles and spaces. They include industry initiatives to conserve resources and preserve the environment, community initiatives to lead the way in local tourism, government initiatives in providing a policy framework that infuses more responsible efforts and civil society efforts in highlighting impacts that intensify the need for greater responsibility. However, understanding responsibility in tourism and developing parameters for its measurement require wide stakeholder participation. This is because all parties have a stake in responsible tourism and have contributions to make to the process of increasing responsibility in tourism.

This paper puts down a broad framework of themes that could constitute a possible definition or understanding of responsible tourism. It draws from an understanding of the impacts of tourism (positive and negative) and efforts from around the world towards responsible tourism.

Economic Responsibility

Proponents of tourism argue that the main economic reasons to support tourism development are its ability to generate high income and employment benefits for the local economy through its multiplier effects. Yet other less

favourable effects such as inflation, leakages and dependency often accompany these positive effects. These need to be weighted carefully, based on accurate assessments of the actual economic effects. Too often, multiplier effects are overestimated, leakages misjudged and cost for infrastructural developments and induced leakages through demonstration effects are not considered. Research and trends have shown that in its current form, neither of these objectives has been achieved to a satisfactory degree in India.

Increasing the percentage of tourism revenues retained within the local economy

The economic rationale behind encouraging tourism is that through its linkages with other sectors of economy, revenues generated can increase the economic prosperity of the local people. This argument would not hold if revenue generated from tourism were not retained within the local economy but were instead leaked out through repatriation or other means thereby nullifying the potential gains to the local economy. For example if a hotel is owned by an investor from outside, the percentage of benefits derived by locals from tourism will never be as high as the investors. The same will be the case if the hotel imports consumables thinking that there is demand for them or that their quality would be superior. If the hotel prefers imported varieties of cheese instead of locally available products from Co-Operative Milk Marketing Federations Limited, or even if tiles are sourced from a “reputed” company, instead of using a more locally produced traditional tile, it amounts to a leakage.

Evaluating dependency of the local economy on tourism

Looking at the tourism statistics, it can be said with considerable certainty that tourism is one of the major sources of income and employment for locals. However, tourism itself is seasonal and highly vulnerable to external and internal impacts. These could include disasters (tsunami, earthquake) health epidemics (SARS, chikungunya), political tensions (riots and terror threats) and factors in tourist source regions (inflation, airline strikes). “In October 2006, about 30 to 35 per cent cancellations had taken place every day after the spread of the news about chikungunya among foreign travellers in the houseboat sector. Similar setback was felt by the resorts in the backwater regions of Alappuzha and Kumarakom”. In such circumstances, it is the local people who are the first affected either by a loss of employment or steep income reductions. Given this, it becomes important for governments to regulate the dependency of local livelihoods and income on tourism. In that case, the state government must concentrate its efforts towards diversifying the local economy base and strengthen linkages with other primary sources of income like fisheries, agriculture and local handicrafts. A possible way of doing this could be to tap the existing linkages with the agricultural sector by sourcing raw materials for tourism from it. Long-term sustainability of local economies requires diversity, which might not be assured if the dependence on one vulnerable sector is so high.

Supporting small, medium enterprises (SMEs) and informal sector initiatives in tourism

In order to allow tourism to benefit and sustain the local economy, mechanisms must be developed to encourage and support small and medium enterprises that require low levels of investment but provide high levels employment to the local labour force. This would help assess the extent of local participation in the tourism industry, the benefits that the local industry derives from it and how sustainable tourism is for the local economy. A very cursory glance at the scenario in most tourism destinations points to the trend that the SMEs (homestays, handicrafts) and the informal (small eateries, shacks, tender coconut vendors) sectors which procure goods locally, provide jobs and are even owned by the local community (when compared to big enterprises) account significantly in tourism. They are also more price-competitive. Often they need financial and technical support, which requires equal government attention.

Avoiding enclavisation in tourism

Enclavisation in the context of tourism refers to the process of converting tourism destinations into enclaves – exclusive islands where mass and niche tourism can flourish – thereby detaching them from local environment, culture and economy. The process of enclavisation in tourism has been a result of the need for exclusivity of the product and dependability of the income. However, enclave models (like “All-Inclusives”, “Resort Islands”, “Special Tourism Areas/Zones”) that signify high concentration of tourism activities in a closed geographic space often result in little benefit to the local economy. Furthermore, there is lesser social interaction and sometimes greater environmental impact due to the intensity of development.

Monitoring price rise in tourism areas

Inflation is a constant economic issue, especially in developing countries with fluctuating monetary regimes. In several areas, it is noticed that in the peak tourist season, there is a sudden and steep rise in prices of all commodities. While it is understandable as to why luxury items will be priced higher (i.e. to take advantage of the high demand), the rise in price of basic commodities impacts local communities severely. It becomes a strain on household budgets especially when it is not matched by a consistent increase in income either from tourism itself or

other sectors. In many destinations, promotion of high-end tourism and steep increases in the price of the tourist product itself means that only a niche international and domestic clientele can afford it. It thus makes tourism inaccessible to a large section of domestic and backpacker tourists and reduces the benefit that the local community can get from these kinds of tourists.

Strengthening local ownership of tourism

Many a time investment in tourism activities comes from outsiders, which tilts the ownership of the industry itself away from the local community. In such cases, local people become beneficiaries dependent on such investment, rather than the owners of the industry. The question of ownership is linked to communities' bargaining power in the industry, range of jobs they have access to, adherence to state labour standards and norms and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the economy itself. Also, the possibility of displacement of communities and denial of access rights to natural resources like water and forests is lesser if ownership is in local hands. Taking the example of Kumarakom, locals have been denied jobs by tourism industry in fear of forming labour unions within the organization. Big groups go for centralized tenders for car rentals and coaches denying the local ancillary industry benefit from tourism.

Social Responsibility

Article 5 of the WTO Global Code of Ethics states that the local population should be associated with tourism activities and share equitably in the economic, social and cultural benefits they generate, benefit from the direct and indirect jobs created by it and tourism policies should be oriented towards improving their standard of living. The need to stress the role that the local communities play in tourism destinations arise from the variety of ways in which tourism affects the lives and livelihoods of host communities.

Sensitising tourists to local culture, social norms and customs

Tourism is an excellent opportunity to learn about other societies, their culture, traditions and lifestyles - when communities welcome tourists into their regions/homes. But often time, the line between being welcomed as a tourist and intruding as a tourist is blurred. It is important for tourists to understand their limits and this can come with greater sensitization of local norms and customs. Along with this comes the understanding that local communities are not just 'host communities' but local residents who have an identity and own the space that is visited. This highlights the need to regulate tourist behaviour when such norms are violated - an aspect which is often ignored in the predominance given to tourist security.

Ensuring that tourism does not intensify existing social tensions, inequities and imbalances

All communities and social spaces have internal hierarchies and imbalances of their own. These could be due to caste, class, ethnicity and origin. When tourism is developed, it must ensure that such tensions are bridged and not intensified. This could be achieved by providing opportunity to under-privileged sections of society and help build their capacity to benefit from tourism.

Strengthening social infrastructure

Tourism can make a significant differences to lives of local communities if it helps build social infrastructure like health, basic water, electricity and education. Most state tourism policies emphasise the importance of physical infrastructure like roads, bridges, airports, helipads, jetties that tourism requires but seldom address needs of social infrastructure. These facilities will benefit both local communities and tourists but for the former it will mean an improvement in standard of living and building capacity for generations. Along with this, even in physical infrastructure, the focus should not be on six-lane highways and airports alone but on building those roads that improve connectivity to local initiatives and markets.

Minimising adverse impacts of tourism on indigenous communities

Tourism many a time intrudes into regions inhabited by indigenous peoples or adivasis for centuries - especially forest areas. When such areas are opened for tourism - especially ecotourism, it utilizes resources like land, water and forests over which indigenous people have customary rights. Indigenous people by virtue of being native inhabitants of these regions are the first and deeply impacted by adverse environmental and social impacts of tourism. In many areas, these take the form of denial of access to community water resources, forest produce, take-over of land (as in such places land rights are not clearly defined as the custom is of community ownership). This finally results in conflict between the local community and tourism industry on the issue of access to basic resources and community rights. The change in demographic patterns that come in from tourism - including high tourist

numbers, settler population from surrounding areas and floating population put huge pressures on the basic resources. The possibility of adverse cultural impacts is also higher with indigenous communities given their unique traditions, identity and customs.

Minimising exploitation and strengthening the decision-making role of women in tourism

Tourism impacts women in diverse ways and is reflective of the larger economic, social, political and cultural roles played by them in the society. Prostitution, misrepresentation, trafficking and sex tourism are some of the directly visible forms of exploitation of women in tourism. A gender bias also persists in the industry with regard to women employees in service provision either through wage discrimination or the type of job they have access to relative to men. Women are also more impacted than men by the adverse socio-cultural impacts of tourism and denial of access to basic resources to run households.

Improving the role of women in decision-making in tourism can help strengthen their role in society and mitigate adverse impacts better. Supporting women's entrepreneurship especially in SME and cottage industries in tourism and ancillary activities can greatly improve the economic benefit they derive.

Eliminating exploitation of children in tourism

The government of India has recently banned child labour in tourism and related activities. Although there are social ramifications of such a measure, it cannot be denied that there is high use of child labour in tourism - especially in the restaurant sector. But unlike other industries, tourism additionally exposes increases the vulnerability of children employed in service position to physical and sexual abuse. Child abuse in the tourism industry can include sexual and non-sexual abuse. The former is visible through the growing problem of child prostitution in popular tourist destinations that is aggravated by the rampant trafficking of children across the globe. The study "Trafficking in Women and Children in India", conducted by the National Human Rights Commission published in January 2006 states that the beaches of Goa and Kovalam are increasingly becoming the main destinations for those seeking child prostitutes². All stakeholders- government, industry and civil society must actively work to end tourism being a source of child exploitation. On the issue of child labour, while the ban is a welcome move, understanding and working with the root causes of child labour, considering how the ban could be implemented without further exploiting the child and setting of up supplementary support structure for working children need to be addressed.

Cultural Responsibility

The impacts of culture can be both positive - through fostering an exchange of cultures and cultural enhancement or negative through commodification of culture, deterioration in traditional systems and loss of cultural identity. The nature of tourism is that it gives the tourist the opportunity to be transported into an alien socio-cultural ambience and a chance to appreciate the unique cultural, traditional lifestyles and tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the region. The WTO Global Code of Ethics has recognized that cultural resources used by tourists belong to the entire mankind but that community in whose territories they are situated have particular rights and obligations, that governments and industry must endeavour to protect and preserve tangible heritage and that tourism must allow cultures to flourish rather than get standardized and die out.

Broadening our understanding of local 'culture'

Culture is an experience, not a product. Local culture comprises more than just costumes and dancing - it includes food, architectural style, language, local arts and handicrafts and all else that constitutes a way of life. At times, tourism provides an opportunity to revive dying arts, crafts and art forms - but it also runs the risk of infusing commercialisation, standardisation, adaptation of tourist demands and monotony into such aspects of local culture. When the artist becomes the artisan, something is wrong in the way culture and tourism interact. Tourism must be an opportunity to instil pride within communities on the richness and diversity of their culture - it must never become a medium to exhibit or showcase culture. This calls of sensitivity in what tourism promotes, how tourists behave and how the destination is portrayed. Tourism, if promoted sensitively, can also help bring back old-world charms of community cultural activities.

Environmental Responsibility

Minimising tourism's impact on biological diversity

Biological diversity is an important attraction of the tourism product of any region so much so that some economies solely depend on it for their sustenance. Biodiversity is an integral part of every ecosystem and plays a key role in maintaining the ecological balance and environment sustainability of the region. Therefore if not conducted in a sustainable manner, tourism can cause irreversible damage through species depletion and ecological degradation. This is especially true in cases of wildlife tourism, ecotourism and safaris where biodiversity is the main product. Efforts should be to regulate tourist numbers and nature of activities in such biodiversity-rich areas.

Avoiding over-exploitation of natural resources

Tourism enterprises like most others do need to utilize resources like land, water and energy. But there is a need to avoid wastage and over-utilisation of resources. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has recognized that tourism must be undertaken keeping in mind the land use patterns of the local community and respecting their traditional rights over natural resources in the region. We have very often seen that the booming tourism escalates land prices to an extent where investors and developers are ready to offer any price for agricultural and forest lands. While this might be a golden egg for the farmer, such a rush in land sale and change in use will dramatically alter the ecology and climate of the region. These are factors that need to be borne in mind to ensure that the ecological balance and attractiveness of the region are secure. Similarly, in the case of water, tourism puts additional demand on scarce water resources in the region and if not used judiciously, can even lead to water scarcity. In such circumstances, it is the local communities who do not have access to water for drinking and basic chores while tourists lounge in pools. Tourism needs to be carefully planned to ensure that the industry's water demand can be met (not just for the present for future as well) without jeopardizing availability of water at an affordable rate to the local community. This could include avoiding golf courses and luxury requirements like pools, Jacuzzis, sprawling gardens and golf courses in water-scarce areas.

Reducing pollution and improving waste disposal mechanisms

Pollution and waste generated out of tourism is of major challenge to the perception that that tourism is an environmentally benign and smokeless industry. The growth of tourism industry without proper regulation has resulted in the deterioration of water bodies like lakes, ponds and backwaters; improper disposal of sewage, wastewater, solid wastes, and increased noise levels. The proliferation of plastic that accompanies tourism is a classic pollution syndrome that most tourism areas suffer from. Sewage from hotels let out into rivers, problems with solid waste disposal and plastic are all too common problems in tourism destinations. In addition to this there is aesthetic pollution caused by building structures that do not fit into the local architectural style.

Developing tourism within the carrying capacity limits of the region

We have often seen that due to unregulated tourism, the environment bears the brunt of heavy tourist traffic and use of natural resources often beyond its carrying capacity. Sometimes tourism - induced construction impedes the natural movement of water and encroached by landfilling to mitigate the additional pressure. Estuaries and backwaters have been reclaimed and mangroves have been cut to build resorts or other tourism establishments. Many of these happen in blatant violation of zonal regulations like the CRZ with further demands for dilution of environmental laws pertaining to tourism. As tourism has the tendency to expand and spread fast in a short duration, prior planning of carrying capacity limits for the present and foreseeable future needs to be done.

Strengthening the Institutional framework for supporting responsibility in tourism

Strengthening local community involvement and decision-making in tourism

In most destinations, tourism follows a top-down development model where plans and policies are made externally and implemented with little local discussion and scrutiny. The voice of local communities – their interests, apprehensions and aspirations – is important to acknowledge in the course of tourism development. Tourism development must respect the rights of communities to say no to tourism that they do not want. Mainstreaming community participation would mean not just seeking their support in implementing tourism projects but also ascertaining their views and opinions at the project planning and policy-making stage. Such an approach helps integrate communities into tourism, can help forecast and mitigate adverse local impacts and give community the time and opportunity to benefit meaningfully from tourism. Such an institutional space must be created by the government in its governance process and respected by the industry. Support and encouragement should also be given to communities who wish to chart their own course in tourism.

One important method of ensuring community involvement in tourism is by strengthening the role of local self-governing bodies in tourism areas (including Panchayati Raj Institutions). The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution are a statutory recognition of the principle of participatory democracy by facilitating the creation, functioning and empowerment of local governing institutions in rural India through panchayats and in Urban India through Municipalities and other urban local bodies. With respect to tourism alone, it has been observed that a majority of tourism's requirements rely on the 29 subjects vested with the Panchayati Raj Institutions. It is important to note that in Kerala all 29 of the subjects have been given to PRIs so as to prepare and implement plans. The panchayats are empowered to safeguard and preserve the traditions, customs and cultural identity of the people, community resources and settle local disputes. But there are several instances where tourism activities have been carried on without the consent of local bodies. There have been moves by the state government to usurp powers of the local governments through new legislation as in the case of Kerala Local Authorities Entertainments Tax (Amendment Bill) 2005. With the Bill, the government may by notification in the Gazette, constitute a Committee for the purpose of categorisation of the amusement parks, ensuring the safety of parks and advise the government for review of the tax structure every three years. The committee does not have any representation from the Panchayat in which the amusement park is located and has taken away their powers to levy tax and ensure safety measures.

Respecting domestic policy and regulatory framework

Tourism has close interlinkages with other sectors of the economy, which makes regulation a challenging task. But it is true that relative to other industries, tourism is the least regulated – both at the national and state levels. It needs to be understood and acknowledged that responsibility in tourism goes hand-in-hand with regulation of tourism. For instance, the regulations at the state and central levels like the Wildlife Protection Act, Forest Conservation Act, Coastal Regulation Zone notification, Forest Rights Act and regulatory framework for social aspects like child prostitution, sexual exploitation and child labour are to be taken into account in the context of responsibility in tourism. The government needs to oversee implementation of these regulations and also support new regulations that might be put in place by local bodies in the effort to increase responsibility.

At the same time, it is important to note the implications of international agreements like the World Trade Organisation's services agreement (that includes tourism) that might constrain the power of sub-national governments to regulate tourism. This is particularly important in the case of regulations put in place for achieving environmental and social objectives that could be overridden by a trade argument.

Several international bodies that are directly and indirectly involved on tourism issues have developed codes and guidelines linked to responsibility aspects. These include the World Tourism Organisation's Global Code of Ethics in Tourism, the Commission on Biological Diversity's Guidelines on Tourism, the UNESCO's charter, the International Cultural Tourism Charter developed by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and industry initiatives by the WTTC like its Blue Print for New Tourism. These could serve as a useful reference for exploring aspects of responsibility in tourism.

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End Notes

1 It is critical to note that the term 'local community' is not a homogenous entity but extremely heterogeneous and diversified. It includes people of different economic strata, origins, ethnicity and caste. So, when we hope that tourism brings benefits to the 'local community' it requires a closer scrutiny and sharper definition of local. Oftentimes, it is the local elite who reap the economic benefits of tourism which might technically constitute 'local community' but without making a difference to the poorest sections within the local community.

2 CRZ rules: State govt sitting tight, newindpress.com 22.10.2005.